

Driving from Baltimore-Washington Airport to Dover Air Force Base, Del., is an education in landscape and culture.

Some might think it's a boring drive with nothing to see but cornfields and miles of prairie—flat highway. But if you're lucky, you'll come upon something quite unique. During a trip to the base in the "small wonder" state, I was one of the lucky ones.

After driving more than an hour, I was getting tired of seeing nothing but cars 10 miles in front of me and 10 miles behind, and the brown stalks of unattended farmland.

However, after crossing the Delaware state line, signs of life began to appear. Large ranch homes came into view that reminded me more of the Texas plains I left behind. Then came the tiny towns with a single gas station and local stores, and finally neighborhoods. I passed a sign: "Dover 12 miles."

Suddenly my eyes caught something I wasn't expecting: horse-drawn buggies. There were about five of them parked outside of a large

store with children's playground sets displayed. The sign read: "Byler's Country Store." Seemed like a good place to stop.

I'd lived in this area before, had seen the buggies, the men with beards and their well-kept farms. The Amish are a prominent constituency of Dover, so much so that the county publishes a pamphlet with tips for

sharing roads with horse-drawn buggies: "Don't get frustrated or impatient and begin honking

the horn — this will only startle the horse and jeopardize lives."

But I never knew about this store. I felt as if I was stepping back in time.

There was an Amish man standing outside. It occurred to me that I'd never actually spoken with an Amish person. I asked if he had a moment. He was cordial, but cautious.

"I don't like that," he said, looking at my open notebook.

"We just have a different way of life, that's all," he said, his accent thick and unfamiliar. "We just like to go about our ways here. But we do like to talk and help people understand us better."

The 'Amish man'

The Amish of Dover are an orthodox Anabaptist sect that separated from the Mennonites in the late 17th century and continue to live the "simple life" shunning modern-day conveniences, trailing plow horses through their fields instead of tractors and operating small country stores or stands in markets, where they sell produce.

The man and I talked some more, until the wind began to blow some paper along the ground. He stepped toward it and then stopped, not wanting to be discourteous.

I asked his name. I felt his eyes.

"You wouldn't be putting that in there, would you?"

I'd like to, I said. He gave it but asked that I not use it.

"Just refer to me," he said, "as 'the Amish man.'"

An agreement, then a handshake, and the Amish man went back into the store to attend to business.

Byler's Store turned out to be a sizable supermarket that stocks Amish and Mennonite necessities such as bulk grains and spices and has an entire wing of wood-burning stoves.

After buying a few pieces of what I think of as old-fashioned candy — an orange and lemon stick — I stepped back outside and went to my car. But before continuing my journey, I took a moment to just look around — and listen.

I heard the energetic clip-clop-clip-clop of a horse-drawn buggy, and that seemed as pure as the land around me. I discovered another wonder of Delaware that day.
— Capt. Christine L. Kunz

Horse-drawn buggies are not an uncommon sight in the outlying areas of Dover, Del., where a large Amish population live a simple life alongside today's modern culture.

by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi

